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SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS IN PLANNING THE REVISION OF GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY¹

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The task intrusted to us is far too large to be satisfactorily performed within the limits of a few months. In fact a year looks all too short. But we have made a start.

Our beginnings, however, rest on foundations laid by others. In 1910 the British Joint Committee, appointed to investigate the possibility of unifying grammatical terminology, made its report. We have in hand, also, reports from the two French committees and from the committees appointed by the New York City Association of High School Teachers of English, and the New Jersey Association of Teachers of English. The National Education Association, the Modern Language Association, and the American Philological Association have appointed a joint committee of fifteen members which is at work on the same question.

The reports in hand establish sufficiently the lack of uniformity in English grammatical terminology, which has been alleged as occasion for the appointment of these various committees. Mr. Round's startling statement that in twenty-five current texts nine different names are used for the construction of *good* in the sentence "He is good" and eighteen different names for the construction of *red* in "We painted our barn red" presents but two of many similar instances of diversity which might be drawn from the tables now generally accessible. Our committee may, I think, appropriate the data already gathered, as it is ample and trustworthy.

The disadvantages to the pupil from such diversity in nomenclature would seem sufficiently obvious in the mere statement. The waste of learning different terms for the same things in differ-

¹Preliminary report of the committee of the National Council of Teachers of English. Read November 29, 1912.

ent grades and different schools, even in different classrooms in the same schools, cannot easily be defended.

But does it actually work out so badly in the judgment of teachers who observe the situation at close range? They ought to know. What do they think about it? Your committee regards their judgment as of the highest importance and will endeavor to collect a representative body of opinions from them. The president of the Council has suggested that the experience of pupils with the present confusion might perhaps be gained directly from themselves, if we can devise some means of getting a register of such experience without making the subject conscious of the process or of its purpose. So far we have not been clever enough to invent a practicable method, but I trust that one may ultimately be forthcoming. The program for this part of our work is still, I regret to say, relatively undefined, and suggestions from anyone interested will be welcome.

Having established the charge of great diversity in grammatical terms, and of a more or less widespread conviction among teachers that greater uniformity is desirable, the committees previously reporting have proceeded to choose out certain terms which they recommend for adoption in all textbooks. But unfortunately, as it would seem, these lists differ considerably from one another. Our committee, therefore, has not the relatively simple choice between following the lead of these committees or of striking out a different line for itself. If such a choice were offered us, we might, in the interests of uniformity, our professed aim, think it desirable to follow the agreement already reached. But as the case stands, we are obliged, and perhaps it is a fortunate obligation, to look deeper than mere uniformity, and try to determine, on the basis of some principle or principles, which of these lists proposed, or which parts of these lists, should, in our judgment, be universally adopted. This does not, of course, imply a quixotic insistence upon some abstract laws of linguistic or pedagogic theory. We are all teachers and know by daily experience that the laws of language and of the human mind operate not in a vacuum, but in the presence of conditions which must be fully recognized if the law is to have more than an academic validity. When, therefore, we say that the

lack of uniformity in the recommendations of previous committees forces us from the ground of mere uniformity to the principles of a right uniformity, we must not be understood as setting out to discover an absolute perfection of terminology, but only to recommend the best terminology which seems to be attainable in the conditions.

What this best attainable terminology may be is, therefore, the crux of our problem. Several tests for it, which have been suggested and applied from time to time in current discussions of the subject, I will name in what seems to me the logical order of their application.

1. First, the test of necessity. This is a principle of exclusion. No grammatical term should be recommended which is not necessary, which indicates grammatical facts and relations not represented in the English language, as does the term "gender," or which makes a distinction not properly linguistic at all, as does the term "abstract noun." This means, "no terminology for the sake of terminology," or primarily for the sake of maintaining the traditions of other languages. After we have secured a body of terms indicating precisely the facts and relations of English speech, other terms may be added without confusion when the student comes to deal with the grammars of other languages. But since the vast majority of our school children study no language but the vernacular, the confusion, if there must be any, should be shifted from the many to the few, who are also presumably better able to resolve it.

2. The test of accuracy. But these terms must, further, be exact—or as exact as we can make them with due regard to the pupil's easy apprehension of them. We all agree that the best terminology, if it does not too grossly offend against the canon of economy, is that which expresses most precisely the essential grammatical fact or relation to be indicated, without arousing misleading connotations in the pupil's mind. Professor Scott's illustration of the term "govern" perhaps represents more incontrovertibly than any other the nomenclature which suggests false ideas of the relations involved; and Professor Hale's discussion of the term "attributive complement" makes clear its inadequacy to express the essential facts about the construction in question.

3. The test of economy. While primarily both necessary and

exact, the best terms will also present to the pupil's mind the fewest possible difficulties of apprehension. They will be relatively simple names, not requiring elaborate explanation from the teacher or textbook. By this test, we should probably, other canons permitting, prefer "past tense" to "preterite," "past perfect" to "pluperfect."

But the question of economy has many aspects. A term which may be in itself simpler sometimes asks additional effort from the pupil, if it is different from, and unrelated to, every other term he has learned. Thus if the pupil is obliged to learn the term "object of a verb," he will probably find it easier to learn "objective case" than "accusative case," and if the term "complement" is also used in other connections, "objective complement" will be better than "factitive object," though, as Professor Hale has pointed out, it is open to criticism on the score of accuracy.

Occasionally it may be found that two or more terms may be combined, without menace to clearness of thinking, so as to disregard a minor distinction, and reduce the number of terms to be learned. This way, however, is fraught with difficulties, not to say dangers. We do not want primarily to save the pupil's mind, but to condition his use of it, so that it may develop most rapidly and soundly. Not mere parsimony, but intelligent expenditure is economy. And for the pupil to recognize, through the learning of an additional name, a real distinction in thought-relations is an undoubted gain to his mental powers, while the suppression of such a distinction in the supposed interests of his mental economy means only loss. The principle here, however, will doubtless give us less trouble than its application to specific terms.

We shall doubtless agree that considerations of economy should, other things being equal, recommend to our adoption terms correlative or identical with other terms which the pupil must learn if he studies a foreign language; but for reasons before stated, this consideration should not operate to introduce confusion or waste into the study of English grammar.

If this committee had absolute power to enforce the adoption of the terminology it should recommend, it need concern itself no further than this about the principle of economy, but in the exist-

ing conditions doubtless the adoption of a term by several committees or its use in a majority of current English grammars will constitute a strong argument for its recommendation by us.

These, then, are the considerations which seem to us most important in determining the nomenclature which we shall recommend to you at our next meeting. A list of terms, adapted from the list submitted by the New York committee, has been drawn up by two members of our committee, and is now undergoing criticism from every other member in the light of the principles I have here stated, and of any others which may disclose themselves in the course of our discussions. It may be that in this process of criticism and discussion we shall revise or even reject some of these principles, besides adding others. They are only a "working basis," sure to be disturbed if we are really working.

And when we have at length come to agreement upon a list of terms, we have still to subject it to the following inquiries: Will this particular list tend to remedy evils alleged against the present nomenclature? In solving certain difficulties of the existing situation has it created others? What will be, so far as can be judged, its actual effect upon the teaching of grammar? Will it satisfy the legitimate demands of scholars as well as those of the practical teacher? Has it profited by the experience of the revisers of terminology not only in grammar but in other subjects, such as chemistry, physics, geology, psychology, zoölogy, botany, economics? What will it cost to make the nomenclature of all English grammars uniform on this basis?

This last question may seem to be of minor importance, but it should not be ignored, since purely commercial considerations may block a measure apparently desirable from every other point of view.

One of the members of our committee, Mr. Alfred D. Sheffield, of Wellesley College, has offered a most interesting suggestion looking toward a thorough reconstruction of grammatical terminology, rather than the mere tinkering with it which has previously been contemplated. I quote from his statement to the committee:

The further classification of words raises the question how far English grammar can make profitable use of the names of the "parts of speech" as those are traditionally applied. "Noun," "adjective," "verb" are names that

apply unequivocally only to words in which certain kinds of meaning and use are designated by a characteristic set of forms: that is, content, function, and form are all conditions of their application. In English, lacking so frequently the formal marks, we pretend to apply these terms "by function," but of course we do nothing of the kind when we talk of a "*noun* used attributively," an "*adjective* used substantively," etc. If our committee can feel its instructions "to consider the possibilities of reform in grammatical nomenclature" to be a warrant for making a statement about the principles that should govern the descriptive nomenclature for words, it could further sound thinking on this matter. A committee on *English* grammar would not, of course, presume to offer new terms for grammar in general. Some of us, indeed, may feel that even to suggest such a thing would put us among the Esperantists and reformed-alphabet people. But it would be of real help to future work in this field to draw out opinions upon a formulation somewhat as follows:

A word is a sense-complex that (as has just been remarked) offers three features for classification: (1) its content (independent meaning), (2) its function (use in the sentence), and (3) its form. For each of these we have a workable set of categories, viz.;

I. For *content*

- | | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| A. Thing | { | Proper (names with designative value) |
| ("substance") | | Common (names with descriptive value) |
| B. Attribute | { | Quality |
| | | Behavior |
| | | Relation { |
| | | Descriptive |
| | | Designative (words that designate by relation to discourse or context, by relation of part to whole, etc.; personal, relative, and possessive pronouns; articles, demonstratives, distributives). |

"Modal" content—number, degree, tense—gives a cross-classification.

II. For "*function*," the bearing, or (in the case of particles) the marking of:

A. A cardinal relation of syntax:

1. Subject
2. Predicate
3. Attributive
4. Adverbial

B. An associative relation (as between sentence-wholes): *and*, *but*, etc.

C. Modal value.

There will be a cross-classification between independent words and particles (words that presuppose a context).

III. For *form* one of certain:

A. Sets of declension and conjugation affixes.

B. Derivative affixes (like *slav-ery*, *en-slave*) that carry syntactic habit.

It is evident that no term really makes out what "part of speech" a word is without telling us what categories under each of these three headings it

answers to. The term, that is, should show three elements, each designating a category respectively of content, of function, and of form. Where, as often in English, *distinctive* form is lacking, the third element would of course be dropped. An ideal nomenclature for words could then resemble that for chemical complexes. Thus in:

sub-carbon-ate
hypo-sulph-ite
hypo-chlor-ous
per-chlor-ic
chlor-ite
nitr-ate

prefixes, stems, and suffixes refer to three different sets of categories, so that each term gives a maximum of information for the speech-material used. Contrast with these, our grammatical terms—preposition, predicate adjective, objective complement, etc.—which tell nothing without running to tedious lengths. We may feel that a reform on this line is “not yet within the field of practical politics,” but we should observe that such a reform is not without precedent. The nomenclature for igneous rocks having grown by mere accretion around a clumsy traditional system, four American petrographers in 1903 published a brand new nomenclature based on quantitative chemical analysis, and on the codification of prefixes, stems, and suffixes. This system, the *Quantitative Classification of Igneous Rocks*, had in 1909 gained such a wide currency as to command its inclusion in *Webster's New International Dictionary*.

Would such an inquiry as this seem to the Council to lie outside our province, or to serve no useful end? Personally I should be glad to devote some of the time and energy of the committee to this task, even though no tangible results should be forthcoming; for I believe that if we do not consider the question seriously, some future committee must and will do so. However, we should not wish to enlarge our commission unwarrantably, or to undertake an arduous and uncertain quest against the expressed judgment of this Council.

In behalf of the committee, I should like to ask for free expressions of opinion, not only on this point but upon any feature of the plans I have here outlined. Standing on the threshold of our task we feel the need of all the help that friendly criticism and suggestion can give us. I hope that the general discussion which follows may yield much of value to us; and any further information or opinion will be gratefully received by me or by any other member of the committee.